

John Hottinger & Carl Cummins: Runoff elections? Yes, please -- but make them instant

Press articles

Star Tribune, January 13, 2009

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EXHIBIT #4
DATE 3-23-11
FILE SB 325

Improving the election process and safeguarding Minnesota's reputation for voting integrity are among the top issues at the State Capitol this year in the wake of the U.S. Senate race recount.

One idea, backed by DFL Sen. Ann Rest and Republican Rep. Laura Brod, is to use runoff elections as an alternative to recounts. Both have said they plan to introduce legislation this session to replace recounts with December runoffs as a fairer way to determine winners in contested and close elections.

It is good that the two legislators are looking at ways to improve the democratic process. Runoff elections ensure that winners in single-seat races can legitimately claim they have won their office with the support of a majority of the voters. Runoff elections would also reduce, although not eliminate, the likelihood of recounts.

The idea of runoff elections is gaining growing consideration in Minnesota, where plurality elections are becoming the norm. In the past election alone, five races — in addition to the Senate race — were decided by a minority of voters: the Third and Sixth Congressional District races, the House District 41A and 51A races, and the Senate District 16 race. Fourteen statewide elections have been won with less than majority support since 1998, when Jesse Ventura became governor with 37 percent of the vote.

But a better way than a second, expensive election in December is an instant-runoff election, which allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference. By capturing voters' additional preferences on the general election ballot, we eliminate the need to ask voters to make a second trip to the polls, which history shows many do not make.


Instant-runoff voting, or IRV, is a tested and accepted system that rolls two elections into one. Imagine it in the recent Senate race, where no candidate topped out with a majority of first-choice votes. Voters would have ranked their favorite candidate first, knowing that if their candidate didn't end up in the top two, their second choice would be counted. For instance, votes cast for Dean Barkley and the other less-popular candidates would have been redistributed to more-popular candidates based on voters' second choices until either Franken or Coleman emerged with a majority of votes.

December runoffs are not only expensive, they attract far fewer voters than general elections — in the recent Georgia Senate race, just 59 percent of those voting in the general election returned for the runoff. Moreover, IRV ensures that voters can cast a ballot for their favorite candidate without fear of "wasting" their vote or inadvertently helping elect the candidate they least prefer.

We do not believe that Minnesotans would like to see political campaigns go on even longer — most of us would like the decision made on Election Day, when turnout is greatest, when campaigns have come to an end and when we've made the vast public expenditure necessary to run an election.

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The choice for improvement is between IRV, which assures us of a 50 percent winner with one election, and a separate runoff, which results in higher public cost; longer, more costly political campaigns, and smaller voter turnout. In a time of deficits, the cost-saving IRV approach should be attractive to Democrats and Republicans alike.

 IRV is already in use in more than half a dozen jurisdictions across the United States and in foreign democracies such as Ireland and Australia. Nearly a dozen other cities are slated to use IRV in the near future. In Minnesota, campaigns are underway in St. Paul and Duluth for the adoption of IRV.

Contrary to Brod's statement that IRV is unconstitutional, it has been found in several state courts to uphold the principle of "one person, one vote." We expect a similar outcome soon in a lawsuit against IRV now pending in Hennepin County.

To assist Minnesota cities that wish to use IRV for municipal elections, Rep. Steve Simon introduced legislation last session that provides consistent rules for the conduct of IRV elections. FairVote Minnesota is pushing for the introduction of this legislation again in the current session.

Minneapolis (this year) and other cities (in the future) are poised to demonstrate how effectively IRV works and pave the way for its use in legislative, statewide and federal races.

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